

ARTICLE APPEARED
ON PAGE A-1

NEW YORK TIMES
5 MAY 1983

PRESIDENT CALLS NICARAGUA REBELS FREEDOM FIGHTERS

CONDEMNS THE SANDINISTS

Describes Andropov Proposal on Reducing Warheads in Europe as Encouraging

By STEVEN R. WEISMAN

Special to The New York Times

WASHINGTON, May 4 — President Reagan said today that insurgent groups in Nicaragua receiving covert aid from the Central Intelligence Agency were "freedom fighters" opposing a Government that had betrayed its revolutionary principles.

He said it would be "all right with me" if Congress wanted to require that assistance to the rebels be "overt instead of covert," but added that there would have to be no further restrictions imposed on their activities.

The President said the Sandinist regime in Nicaragua, which took power in a revolution in 1979, was "a Government out of the barrel of a gun" and questioned its right to retain power.

Question of Legitimacy

"What makes them anymore a legitimate government than the people of Nicaragua who are asking for a chance to vote for the kind of government they want?" Mr. Reagan asked. He said the Nicaraguan "freedom fighters" began their effort after the Government abrogated voting and other rights.

Until Mr. Reagan's comments today, the Administration had maintained that the sole purpose of covert aid to anti-Government groups in Nicaragua was to halt the flow of weapons. Mr. Reagan's comments marked the first time he or any other senior official had spoken of the desirability of assisting groups whose purpose was to challenge the Sandinist regime in Nicaragua.

Soviet Offer 'Encouraging'

In a news conference with six White House correspondents, the President dealt almost exclusively with foreign policy issues.

¶He found "encouraging" the offer made Tuesday by Yuri V. Andropov, the Soviet leader, to reduce medium-range nuclear forces in Europe in numbers of warheads as well as in numbers of missiles and planes. "We feel that way, and have felt that way for some time, that this is what we should be negotiating," Mr. Reagan said.

¶He declined to criticize the pastoral letter approved by the Roman Catholic bishops of the United States denouncing the use of nuclear weapons. He said that he had not read the 45,000-word letter but that it seemed to be "a legitimate effort to do exactly what we're doing, and that is to try to find some ways toward world peace."

¶He defended his foreign policies generally, disputing a questioner's characterization of them as "very unsuccessful so far." He said that Beirut was "no longer being shelled on a daily basis around the clock" by the Israelis, that "we are down to negotiating the withdrawal of foreign forces" in Lebanon and that the Atlantic Alliance had never been "any more solid than it is now."

¶He said he was certain that Arab nations "are very serious about wanting the continuation of the peace talks" involving Israel and Jordan over the disposition of the West Bank. He said "we have to recognize" that the countries would have to agree before negotiations could proceed without the Palestine Liberation Organization.

¶He said he was "very upset" that some of his aides were disseminating "these tales" about disagreements among his staff. He called the news accounts of staff rivalry exaggerated and said he was "trying to find out" who was discussing the matter with reporters.

Speaking of Congress and the issue of covert aid to Nicaraguan rebels, Mr. Reagan said: "If they want to tell us that we can give money, and do the same things we've been doing — money, giving, providing assistance and so forth to these people directly — and making it overt instead of covert, that's all right with me. I just don't want the restrictions put on it that they might put on."

The President did not refer to any specific Congressional restrictions. The House Select Committee on Intelligence, seeking to restrict aid to the interception of weapons from Nicaragua to El Salvador, voted Tuesday to cut off funds for the Central Intelligence Agency to conduct covert military actions in Nicaragua.

Besides seeming to suggest that the Administration sought to challenge the Sandinist regime, the President's comments today also appeared to contradict a previous assertion by the Administration that it was not breaking a law approved by Congress in December barring any aid that might be used to overthrow the Nicaraguan Government.

Asked if he was now saying that the United States supported groups "who seek the overthrow of the Nicaraguan Government," Mr. Reagan said:

"Well, do they? Or are they asking that Government — or that revolution of which they themselves were a part — asking it to go back to its revolutionary promises and keep faith with the revolution that the people of Nicaragua supported?"

Vote to Cut Off Funds

Mr. Reagan's comments on the turbulent Central American situation came only a day after the House intelligence committee's 8-to-5 vote to cut off funds for C.I.A. covert military actions in Nicaragua. Instead, the committee authorized \$80 million for overt aid to "any friendly country in Central America" to interrupt the supply of weapons to the Salvadoran guerrillas.

The committee's vote was considered a serious setback for the Administration. Mr. Reagan said today that if the ban on covert aid to Nicaraguan rebel groups were approved by Congress as a whole, it would set "a very dangerous precedent."

He said the committee vote "was literally taking away the ability of the executive branch to carry out its constitutional responsibilities." Mr. Reagan noted, however, that the committee

Continued